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H.D., Daughter of Helen: Mythology as Actuality

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Abstract
For H.D., classical mythology was an essential means of expression, first acquired in childhood and repossessed throughout her life. H.D.'s extensive output of poems, memoirs, and novels is marked by a pervasive Hellenism which evolved in response to the changing conditions of her life and art, but remained her constant idiom. She saw herself as reliving myth, and she used myth as a medium through which to order her own experience and to rethink inherited ideas. If myth served H.D. as a resource for self-understanding and artistic expression, H.D. herself has served subsequent poets, critics, and scholars as a model for the writer's ability to reclaim myth, to create something new and personal out of ancient shared traditions.

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Gregory A. Staley, editor

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For my Mother
Kathleen Elaine Staley
in memoriam

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Mythology as Actuality

Sheila Murnaghan

For H.D., classical mythology was an essential means of expression, first acquired in childhood and repossessed throughout her life. H.D.'s extensive output of poems, memoirs, and novels is marked by a pervasive Hellenism which evolved in response to the changing conditions of her life and art, but remained her constant idiom.[1] She saw herself as reliving myth, and she used myth as a medium through which to order her own experience and to rethink inherited ideas. If myth served H.D. as a resource for self-understanding and artistic expression, H.D. herself has served subsequent poets, critics, and scholars as a model for the writer's ability to reclaim myth, to create something new and personal out of ancient shared traditions.

While H.D.'s adult life was spent in England and Europe, her use of myth is rooted in her American childhood. Her childhood is recalled in her memoir, *The Gift*, written in London during the Second World War and published posthumously in 1969.[2] She was born in 1886 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where she grew up in the heart of the Moravian Christian community that was centered in Bethlehem and in which her mother's parents were leading figures. She lived there until she was nine, when her father, an astronomer, moved from Lehigh University to the University of Pennsylvania and the family settled outside Philadelphia. H.D.'s identity was shaped by the combination of her father's much-honored scientific vocation with a visionary, religious, artistic, and utopian legacy associated with her mother, her maternal grandmother, and their Moravian ancestors:

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this legacy, which H.D. was claiming as her own as she wrote amid the terrors of the blitz, is the gift that gives her memoir its title.

In *The Gift*, H.D. evokes a child's instinctive fusion of immediate experience with cultural traditions, including, in her case, both Christianity and classical mythology, which she encountered through the works of Hawthorne, read to her by her mother and by her teacher at school. As she and her brothers wait to open the cardboard box that contains the wooden figures of the Christmas crèche, she thinks of the "picture of Pandora and her box in the *Tanglewood Tales* that Miss Helen read us, Friday afternoons, if we were good instead of lessons" (94).

H.D.'s recollection of *Tanglewood Tales* identifies her as one of the many late nineteenth and early twentieth century readers and writers whose imagination was shaped by Hawthorne's transformation of classical myth into literature for children. Hawthorne's two myth collections *A Wonder-Book for Boys and Girls* (1851) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853) were inspired by his long-held view that, as he put it in the preface to *A Wonder-Book,* "many of the classical myths were capable of being rendered into very capital reading for children" (Hawthorne 1163). In his renditions of Greek myths, Hawthorne assimilated them to other stories for children, notably fairy tales, which were in the same period being identified and recast as children's literature, and in some cases turned myths into stories about children (Donovan, Roberts).

Hawthorne's version of the Pandora story (which actually appears in *A Wonder-Book*) is given the title "A Paradise of Children," and Epimetheus and Pandora are portrayed as children living at a time of edenic universal childhood, ended by Pandora's act of opening the box. Those mythic children are idealized versions of the contemporary American children whom Hawthorne intended as his audience and incorporated into his books as internal audiences of fictional sessions in which a Williams College student, Eustace Bright, tells the myths to a group of younger friends and relatives. As he concludes the Pandora tale, Hawthorne's narrator makes the connection explicitly: "'PRIMROSE,' asked Eustace, pinching her ear, 'how do you like my little Pandora? Don't you think her the exact picture of yourself? But you would not have hesitated half so long about opening the box'" (Hawthorne 1230).

In her identification of Pandora with herself and her brothers, H.D. fulfills and perpetuates Hawthorne's vision of myth as the province of modern children. In her development from one of

Hawthorne's child readers into a compelling revisionist of classical myth, she reveals the power of Hawthorne's legacy. Hawthorne himself championed myth revision, not just because he saw myths as suited for a new child audience, but also because he saw them as transcendent stories that belonged to no particular time and place. Eustace Bright defends his versions to a pedantic classicist by asserting that "an old Greek had no more exclusive right to them than a modern Yankee has." In fact, Bright has a low opinion of the Greeks as lacking passion: "My own opinion is, that the Greeks, by taking possession of these legends (which were the immemorial birthright of mankind), and putting them into shapes of indestructible beauty, indeed, but cold and heartless, have done all subsequent ages an incalculable injury" (Hawthorne 1255). Hawthorne thus stands as an important precursor for H.D. and other writers who have asserted their freedom to reshape myth in response to the perceived shortcomings of more canonical versions.[3]

Hawthorne's redirection of myth to children turned his view of myth as a birthright into a self-fulfilling prophesy. Encountered early, myth becomes a personal possession grafted onto the people and places of an individual childhood rather than a discrete cultural inheritance derived from a distant time and place. As a result, when writers like H.D. encounter myth in its traditional classical forms, they have already internalized it and are primed to remake it as their own. A contemporary example is the poet Louise Glück, who, like H.D., regularly reimagines classical myths in her works. In an autobiographical essay, Glück writes of her early integration of Greek mythology into her own language and consciousness: "Before I was three, I was well grounded in the Greek myths, and the figures of those stories, together with certain images from the illustrations, became fundamental referents" (Glück 7). Here the role of illustrations recalls H.D.'s experience with Pandora's box and indicates a primary connection to mythology in a form already removed from classical sources.

Unlike Hawthorne, H.D. developed a strong attraction to the Greeks and to Greece, but the Greek landscape was already charged with personal meanings before she ever visited it. She had already identified an island in the Lehigh river as "Calypso's island" and freely associated the important people of her childhood with Greek places, most importantly her mother, who like her teacher was named Helen, but also the family servant Ida.

> "Can I help you wash clothes, Ida?" This is Ida, this is that mountain, this is Greece, this is Greek, this is Ida; Helen? Helen, Hellas, Helle, Helios, you are too bright, too fair, you are sitting in the darkened parlor, because you "feel the heat," you who are rival to Helios, to Helle, to Phoebus the sun. You are the sun and the sun is too hot for Mama, she is sitting in the sitting room with Aunt Jennie and they are whispering like they do, and they hide their sewing when they come in. I do not care what they talk about. They leave me out of everything. Ida does not leave me out, "Here take this," says Ida. "Now squeeze it harder, you can get it drier than that." I am helping Ida wring out the clothes. (*The Gift* 114)

H.D. here recalls an internal drama in which all elements have a mythological dimension. Both the mother who excludes the child and from whom the child distances herself, and the relative outsider who includes her and gives her a sense of control, are associated with Greece. At other points, mythology stands out as a distinct mode of knowledge that gives new understanding and greater mastery. In *The Hedgehog*, a story she wrote for her daughter Perdita during the 1920's, H.D. tells another version of a child's self-distancing from her mother. The heroine of that story, Madge, leaves her mother's side for a brief adventure on a mountain in Switzerland, where the two are living (as H.D. and Perdita also were when *The Hedgehog* was written). There Madge encounters figures who have mythological dimensions, including an eagle identified with Zeus and a boy identified with Pan, and gains new insights and a greater sense of independence before returning home. Here we can observe the fluid transfers between the real and the mythic characteristic of H.D.'s imagination: a mountain, associated through myth in H.D.'s childhood imagination with the encouraging family servant, reappears as the literal, modern-day setting of a similarly encouraging first encounter with quasi-mythical figures.

In *The Gift*, mythology sometimes belongs to the particular perspective of the adult H.D., through which she brings out the significance of childhood memories. Looking back at her blissful love for the family dog, she comments: "Mythology is actuality, as we now know. The dog with his gold-brown wool, his great collar and the barrel, is of course none other than our old friend Ammon-Ra, whose avenue of horned sphinxes runs along the sand from the old landing-stage of the Nile barges to the wide portals of the temple at Karnak" (84).

In these recollections of myth as embedded in her childhood, we can see the various elements that defined H.D.'s relationship to mythology throughout her career: a vision of myth as corresponding to something real and archetypal; myth as the hinge between personal experience and universal patterns; ancient Egypt as a site at which mythic patterns were realized with particular authority; the mutual implication of narrative and landscape; the presentation of oppositions within a mythological framework, and the importance of the mother.

H.D.'s inauguration as a writer was accompanied by an assertion of Greekness that reflected a convergence of influences: her own study and long-standing interests[4]; the literary and cultural fashions of London, where she was then living, in the first decade of the twentieth century; and the emerging aesthetic of a group of poets, the imagists, of which she was a major figure, along with Richard Aldington and Ezra Pound, two men to whom she had both personal and artistic ties. Aldington became her husband in a complicated marriage marked by artistic collaboration, a stillborn child, sexual betrayal, and separation. Pound was a personal link between her American youth and her European adulthood. H.D. knew Pound and was briefly engaged to him when he was a student at the University of Pennsylvania; after a disastrous first year at Bryn Mawr College, she traveled to Europe with her close friend Frances Gregg and met up with Pound again. H.D. settled in London, and Pound became her literary champion, using her poetry as the basis for the new poetic movement that he was busy inventing.

In 1912 Pound sent three of H.D.'s poems to Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, with the signature "H.D., *Imagiste*," giving her the stripped down name that she would use for the rest of her career (long after the short life of the imagist movement) and making her the emblematic figure of imagism. In a letter accompanying the poems, he labeled them "straight talk, straight as the Greek," identifying Greekness with the qualities sought by the imagists: clarity, concision, impersonality, concrete images, and everyday diction. Imagism was a formative movement at the birth of modernism; it constituted a reaction against the continuing legacy of romanticism, manifested in poetry that was self-referential, emotional, and high-flown, and was allied with a vision of the classical as cool, pure, and detached.[5] Using H.D. as its exemplar, Pound also identified that vision as modern, American, and personal: "I . . . am sending you

some *modern stuff* by an American. I say modern, for it is the laconic speech of the Imagistes, even if the subject matter is classic. At least H.D. has lived with these things since childhood and knew them before she had any book knowledge of them" (Pound 11; emphasis in original).

H.D.'s relationship to the Greeks in her early poetry was connected to an interest in particular Greek poets, mostly lyric poets, whom she was translating as well as adapting in her own works. She was especially drawn to authors other than the most prominent figures of the classical period: to authors whose poems are brief, or made brief through transmission as fragments; to women poets and poets who wrote about love between women, especially Sappho, and to the later poets of the Greek anthology. These authors did not generally offer sustained mythical narratives, but rather used myth allusively, as a kind of poetic shorthand, with a concision highly congenial to the imagist aesthetic. In many of her earliest poems, H.D.'s own mythical references are detectable enough to give the work a classical stamp, but hardly elaborated and often more condensed even than those of her models. Those brief references just barely contain powerful feelings, often associated with submersion in a violent landscape.

One of the three poems first published in *Poetry*, "Hermes of the Ways" (sometimes identified as the defining work of imagism) exemplifies the concision with which H.D. often used classical material (*CP* 37–39). Its inspiration is an epigram by one of the handful of surviving female poets, Anyte. As is typical of many epigrams, Anyte's poem presents itself as a speaking statue:

> I, Hermes, stand here by the windy tree-lined
> crossroads near the white coastal water,
> sheltering men weary from the road—
> my fountain murmurs cold and clear. (trans. Diane Rayor)

Taking this poem as her model, H.D. engages with the cult figure of Hermes and his embodiment in a single image, in this case a statue, rather than with Hermes as the subject of particular stories. In her version, she reverses the roles of speaker and addressee, making her speaker a wanderer who encounters Hermes, and who defines both Hermes and him/herself by invoking him. She also turns the neutral, coastal setting of the original into a place of buffeting winds and waves, against which the shelter of the shore is barely maintained—

a form of landscape to which her imagination repeatedly returned and which was typified for her by islands like those of Greece.

> The boughs of the trees
> are twisted
> by many bafflings;
> twisted are
> the small-leafed boughs.
>
> But the shadow of them
> is not the shadow of the mast head
> nor of the torn sails.
>
> Hermes, Hermes,
> the great sea foamed,
> gnashed its teeth about me;
> but you have waited
> where sea grass tangles
> with shore grass.

In another of H.D.'s most famous early poems, a similar experience of the turbulent juncture of land and sea is identified as classical only by the poem's title, "Oread," which was added after its initial publication (*CP* 55, quoted here in full).

> Whirl up, sea—
> whirl your pointed pines,
> splash your great pines
> on our rocks,
> hurl your green over us,
> cover us with your pools of fir.

The muted mythical references of these poems signal a claim to qualities considered classical rather than a connection to historical Greece or a project of exactly recreating Greek poetry. In a famous critique, H.D. was taken to task by Douglas Bush in his 1937 book *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* for the ahistoricism of her vision and the looseness of her translations: "The Greece she dwells in has no connections with the Greece of historic actuality" (Bush 505). As a number of H.D.'s admirers have pointed out, Bush's comment is superficially true, but misses the point (Colecott 104–7; Greenwood; Gregory 28–29, 54–56). H.D. was not indifferent to scholarship and worked hard at learning Greek, but her goals were

not scholarly. As she herself put it in one of the extensive notes on Greek authors that she composed, "I know that we need scholars to decipher and interpret the Greek, but we also need poets and mystics and children to rediscover this Hellenic world, to see *through* the words" (Gregory 68; emphasis in original).

What H.D. saw through the words of Greek poets and expressed through her adaptations of them was, as she herself acknowledged, her own experience. In an interview published in 1969, her friend and literary executor Norman Holmes Pearson recalls that H.D. always viewed herself as an American and "never thought of herself as anything but that, and she often told me that her nature imagery, for example, was never really Greek but came from her childhood reminiscences of Watch Hill and the coasts of Rhode Island and Maine, which she used to visit with her friends as a child" (Pearson 437). H.D. herself made the same point in 1937 writing about her early poems, "It is nostalgia for a lost land. I call it Hellas. I might, psychologically just as well, have listed the Casco Bay islands off the coast of Maine" ("A Note on Poetry" 1287).

H.D.'s mention of nostalgia points to the strong emotion for which the Greek setting, combined with the strictures of imagist style (themselves identified as Greek), served her as a medium of controlled expression. Making a similar point, Louis Martz, the editor of H.D.'s *Collected Poems 1912–1944*, cites a story that reveals the ecstatic passion of H.D.'s connection to her native landscape and draws a connection between that passion and the intense response to nature voiced in poems like "Oread." In his autobiography, William Carlos Williams, who was, with Pound, a friend of H.D.'s while she was still in Pennsylvania, describes a walk in which he and H.D. were overtaken by a thunderstorm. "Instead of walking or even running towards a tree Hilda sat down in the grass at the edge of the hill and let it come. 'Come beautiful rain,' she said, holding out her arms. 'Beautiful rain, welcome'" (Martz xiii).

Several critics have shown in detail how H.D.'s use of Greek settings and a style based on Greek lyric, especially that of Sappho, functioned as well as a vehicle for displaced accounts of the "many bafflings" of her early adult life, in which the public trauma of the First World War intersected with complicated, often painful personal relations: passionate attachments to both men and women; erotic betrayals and rejections; a stillbirth brought on—H.D. believed—by the sinking of the *Lusitania*; the death of her brother in the war; the

subsequent death of her father; Aldington's military service and shell-shocked return; the birth of a child who was not Aldington's and whom Aldington refused to accept.

The availability of unpublished versions of some of H.D.'s published poems has made it possible to trace her technique (Dodds 31–70, Martz). A poem that in unpublished draft form was entitled "Eros" (*CP* 315–19) and that details the loss of a lover was reworked before publication and given the title "Fragment Forty" (*CP* 173–75). The new title turns the poem from an account of lost love in a modern, ostensibly personal voice, into the recreation of a work by Sappho, a two line fragment in which Eros is memorably labeled *glukupikron*, "bittersweet," and compared to an irresistible creeping bug. In reworking the poem, H.D. omitted such direct erotic passages as:

> My mouth is wet with your life,
> my eyes blinded with your face,
> a heart itself which feels
> the intimate music.

Instead, she chose to begin the poem with a more generalized evocation of the mythical figure of Eros.

> Keep love and he wings,
> with his bow
> up, mocking us,
> keep love and he taunts us
> and escapes.

As she expanded beyond the short poems of the brief imagist movement into longer works of both prose and poetry, H.D. developed more sustained mythological parallels to grapple with the issues that preoccupied her. In the early 1920s she produced *Hippolytus Temporizes*, a long narrative poem based on Euripides' *Hippolytus*. There (to pull out one strand from the poem's complex web) a haunting personal debate between passion and autonomy is articulated through the conflict between Artemis and Aphrodite (DuPlessis, *Career* 13). This is, then, an adult version of an opposition stated in classical terms reminiscent of the similar opposition in H.D.'s childhood reminiscence of Helen and Ida.

In the same period, she also wrote *Palimpsest*, a novel or linked series of stories, whose title and form point to recurrent patterns

resurfacing in different times and places, muting historical difference. *Palimpsest* brings together three stories, or manifestations of the same story, set in Greece under Rome, in London after the First World War, and on a modern Egyptological expedition. Each story tells a version of what came to be a kind of master-plot for H.D.: a woman artist finds herself and gains her artistic vocation by turning away from erotic ties with men, forming bonds with women that answer to a deep longing for a mother. Resolution is associated with arrival in Egypt, which signified for H.D. a liminal site of cultural mixture, where the clarity and rationality associated with Greece and particularly Athens were combined with sensuousness, magic, and religious mysticism (Gregory 43–52). The parallels developed in *Palimpsest* and other of H.D.'s experimental fictions are reminiscent of other modernist projects, notably Joyce's *Ulysses*, which also layers modern experience on an ancient plot.

Hippolytus Temporizes reflects H.D.'s particular attraction to Euripides, whom she found especially sympathetic among male classical authors for his attunement to women and his untraditional versions of well-known myths (Gregory 179–231). Euripides' works provided an ancient precedent for the mythological revision that remains one of H.D.'s main poetic legacies. H.D. made myths her own, not only to use them as vehicles for her own experience, but also to rewrite them: she both embraced myths for their correspondences to what she knew in her own life and reinvented them to make them more responsive to her hard-won knowledge of varied forms of sexuality, of the pain of abandonment, and of the devastating effects of patriarchal, militaristic culture.

In this respect, H.D, stands as an influential precursor for the many women writers who, from the mid-twentieth century on, have retold myths from the perspectives of women and other marginalized figures, articulating perspectives and values that are not fully explored in the male-authored versions we have inherited from antiquity.[6] Some of the most prominent North American examples include Muriel Ruykeser, Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood, Rita Dove, Linda Pastan, Louise Glück, Adrienne Rich, Judy Grahn (of whom the last two have been especially clear about H.D.'s importance for their own revisionist, feminist, and lesbian poetics (Grahn; Friedman, "I Go Where I Love"). This aspect of H.D.'s work has helped to make her a major focus for feminist literary critics, the subject of a

distinguished critical tradition that took shape with her discovery and recognition as a major modernist writer during the flowering of feminist criticism in the 1970s and 1980s.[7]

In poems written over several decades, H.D. animates some of the most prominent goddesses and heroines of classical mythology. With characteristic economy and deftness, she manages at once to open up the subjectivities of those figures and to critique the traditional narratives in which they have been imprisoned. The middle stanza of a brief poem entitled "Helen" illustrates her efficiency (*CP* 155).

> All Greece reviles
> the wan face when she smiles,
> hating it deeper still
> when it grows wan and white,
> remembering past enchantments
> and past ills.

In these lines we glimpse Helen from the inside, offering up her alluring smile as an attempt at appeasement in the face of hatred, and we also see the confining force of that hatred. The external view of Helen as an enchanting source of evil is depicted as a powerful cultural consensus, held by "all Greece," that is gradually killing her.

"Helen" is spoken from the perspective of an outside observer who detects the dynamic in which all Greece is caught up and intuits Helen's inner state. In other poems, H.D. gives voices to mythical women with which they speak, not to the men who have misunderstood and misrepresented them, but past them, addressing those men in their absence, or offering voiced thoughts for the poem's readers to overhear. In "Eurydice" (*CP* 51–55), Eurydice addresses Orpheus, but across the impassable barrier separating life and death, which his action has placed between them:

> So you have swept me back,
> I who could have walked with the live souls
> above the earth,
> I who could have slept among the live flowers
> at last. . . .

H.D.'s Eurydice is shrewd as well as angry, exposing the male egotism that has consigned her to Hades:

what was it you saw in my face?
the light of your own face?
the fire of your own presence?

And the pain of abandonment is also combined with a defiant self-sufficiency:

yet for all your arrogance
and your glance,
I tell you this:
such loss is no loss . . .

. . .

At least I have the flowers of myself,
and my thoughts, no god
can take that;
I have the fervour of myself for a presence
and my own spirit for light. . . .[8]

In "Demeter" (*CP* 111–15) we hear the goddess comment ruefully on the conventions through which she is generally portrayed ("Ah they have wrought me heavy / and great of limb—") and assert her maternal power. Claiming Dionysus as the object of her nurture, an abandoned baby left on the ground, she rejects the male-centered tradition of the baby god's rebirth from Zeus' thigh.

Enough of the lightening
enough of the tales that speak
of the death of the mother:
strange tales of a shelter
brought to the unborn,
enough of tale, myth, mystery, precedent—
a child lay on the earth asleep.

At the end of the poem, she turns to Persephone and contrasts her own strong maternal arms, which tend and protect her beloved daughter, with the grasping arms of Hades.

Ah, strong were the arms that took
(ah, evil the heart and graceless),
but the kiss was less passionate.

The surprise hint at the end of "Demeter" of a mother's erotic tie to her daughter is one example of H.D's use of myth to explore forms

of sexuality that have no place in traditional narratives. Equally unexpected is her rewriting in "Leda" of the coupling of Leda and the swan, which led to the conception of Helen. The violence and duplicity of the traditional rape narrative are replaced by a gentle, blissful union. Zeus's transformation into a swan is matched by Leda's metamorphosis into a day-lily that "outspreads and rests / beneath soft fluttering / of red swan wings." The setting is once again the border of land and sea, but it is a peaceful border "where tide and river meet." Both of these poems reflect H.D.'s strong, continuous interest in mother-daughter pairs. She returns repeatedly to Helen's daughter, Hermione, as well as her mother Leda, and gives several accounts of the Persephone story, another myth first encountered in *Tanglewood Tales* (*The Gift* 78).

In 1937 H.D. published a relatively long poem, which now appears in her *Collected Poems* under the title "Calypso" (*CP* 388–96) but originally had the more interesting and telling title "Callypso Speaks." The misspelling in H.D.'s original title suggests her unscholarly relationship to classical material; the verb "speaks" manages succinctly to convey that the poem is giving a voice to a character who has previously been denied one.

The poem retells the episode from the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus himself first appears. H.D. replaces Homer's leisurely external narration with a brief series of speeches by Odysseus and Calypso that have the form of a dialogue but are more often inner monologues or apostrophes of gods and nature than instances of communication between the two of them. The sequence begins as Odysseus climbs ashore and Calypso watches him; there's a brief exchange as he tracks her down in her cave and seduces her. Then we hear the thoughts of each as Odysseus leaves. Odysseus' thoughts conform throughout to the story told in the *Odyssey*, in which Calypso is deeply attached to Odysseus, welcomes him eagerly, and lets him go in rueful compliance with Zeus' will, sadly noting his preference for Penelope but also helping him on his way. H.D.'s Odysseus approaches Calypso with automatic confidence, observing "a nymph is a woman," and sails away full of thoughts of her tender care and many gifts.

> she gave me water
> and fruit in a basket,
> and shallow
> baskets of pulse and grain, and a ball

of hemp
for mending the sail;

she gave me a willow basket
for letting into the shallows
for eels;

she gave me peace in her cave.

Calypso's own thoughts tell a different story. In her initial view of him, Odysseus is an unwelcome intruder: awkward, repellant, and ill-adapted to life on shore.

Clumsy futility, drown yourself—
did I ask you to this rock-shelf.
did I lure you here?

. . .

O oaf, o ass,
O any slow plodding and silly animal,
O man,
I am amused to think you may fall . . .

After his seduction of her, Calypso herself falls for Odysseus, proclaiming "O you gods—O you gods— / he shall never get away." But when he does get away, she gives voice to curses and a renewed disgust, which again embraces the entire race of men.

O you clouds,
here is my song;
man is clumsy and evil,
a devil.

O you sand, this is my command,
drown all men in slow breathless suffocation—
then they may understand.

O you winds,
beat his sails flat,
shift a wave sideways
that he suffocate.

When Calypso speaks, her words undercut the complacent thoughts of Odysseus, as well as the tradition through which she has been

portrayed as an obliging accessory to Odysseus' grand plan of triumphant homecoming.[9]

H.D.'s internalized sense of myth was extended and refined by a number of external influences, including her reading of the anthropological theorists of the early twentieth century, among them J. G. Frazer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jesse Weston, Robert Graves, and, most likely, Jane Harrison, who variously stressed the recurrence of mythic patterns, explored the psychology of Greek religion, and promoted ideas of a primary matriarchal stage of human culture.[10] Her view of myth's spiritual dimension was further shaped by an interest in spiritualism and the occult, which she pursued with increased intensity beginning in the 1920s (Friedman, *Psyche Reborn* 157–206). These influences fostered her development of a syncretist religious vision, in which Christian and pagan elements were merged, as in her childhood image of Pandora's box, which was her response to the modernist concern with the loss of faith.

An especially powerful influence was H.D.'s encounter with both the thought and the personality of Sigmund Freud, with whom she studied, and by whom she was analyzed in 1933 and 1934, turning to him at a time when she felt her work had become stagnant and repetitive, an experience evoked in her memoir, *Tribute to Freud*. H.D. revered Freud, as the title of her memoir indicates, yet she was also in profound disagreement with him on central points (Friedman, *Psyche Reborn* 87–154). Most explicit was her divergence from his scientific denial of the transcendent ("an argument implicit in our very bones," *Tribute* 13), which stood in strong contrast to her own visionary mode and belief in the occult. She also registered her discontent with his view of women as capable of creativity only with the inspiration of men (149). Less explicitly, she was out of sympathy with his views of normative human development, in which bisexuality and universal attraction to the female were stages to be left behind rather than the constants of her own experience.

But, whatever their disagreements, Freud's relationship to mythology was highly compatible with H.D.'s own. Freud too had seized on Greek myth as a blueprint for individual experience, finding in the Oedipus myth a model for a key stage of human psychological development. Freud's views reinforced her own belief that mythic patterns are universal and provide an underlying link between different cultures and different historical eras as well as

the key to individual experience; in *Tribute to Freud*, she several times quotes his claim that "the childhood of the individual is the childhood of the race" (*Tribute* 12) as well as his observation that "You discovered for yourself what I discovered for the race" (18). And she responded in particular to Freud's sense of myth as a symbolic system that could unlock obscured truths (reflected in a shared interest in hieroglyphics), even if she departed from him in locating those truths in a mystical reality beyond the material or the psychological.

Many passages in *Tribute to Freud* illustrate the pervasiveness and subtlety of the mythical thinking in which H.D. engaged in collaboration with Freud. The most consequential moment of illumination in her analysis occurs when Freud points to H.D.'s own habits of mythical association to explain a momentous, perturbing event in her life. This had occurred in 1920, when H.D. made her first trip to Greece. She traveled there with Bryher (the chosen name of her companion Winifred Ellerman), who had entered H.D.'s life in 1918. Bryher offered financial and emotional support at the difficult juncture when H.D., exhausted from the private and public turbulence of the previous decade, gave birth to her daughter Perdita; the culmination of Bryher's rescue of H.D. was a visit to Greece: "If I got well, she would herself see that the baby was protected and cherished and she would take me to a new world, a new life, to the land, spiritually of my predilection, geographically of my dreams" (40–41).

Visiting Corfu with Bryher, H.D. had a strongly affecting series of visions. Freud saw these visions as highly significant and interpreted them for her: "The Professor translated the pictures on the wall, or the picture-writing on the wall of a hotel bedroom in Corfu, the Greek-Ionian island, that I saw projected there in the spring of 1920, as a desire for union with my mother. I was physically in Greece, Hellas (Helen). I had come home to the glory that was Greece" (44).

At another point, it is H.D.'s exposure to Freud as a figure of authority, notably resembling her father, rather than anything he himself says, that leads her to a strikingly Freudian understanding of a childhood episode, an occasion on which H.D.'s brother got into trouble for playing with their father's magnifying glass.

> I do not know, he does not know that this, besides being the magnifying glass from our father's table, is a sacred symbol. . . . I did not know this when I stood beside my brother in the garden. It is only now that I write this that I see how my father possessed

> sacred symbols, how he, like the Professor, had old, old sacred objects on his study table. But the shape and form of these objects, sanctified by time, were not so identified. They were just a glass paper-weight, just a brass paper-knife or the ordinary magnifying glass that my brother is still holding in his hand.
>
> What will my brother say? He cannot say, "I brought fire from heaven." He cannot answer father Zeus in elegant iambics and explain how he Prometheus, by his wit and daring, by his love of the unknown, by his experimentation with occult, as yet unexplainable forces, has drawn down fire from the sky. It is an actual fact. But my brother has never heard of Prometheus, he doesn't know any Greek. (*Tribute* 25)

Here the Prometheus myth works very differently than in the Hawthorne-inflected vision of Pandora and her box found in *The Gift*. Prometheus is in this version a fully adult figure, and he stands up to his father in an act of rebellion reminiscent of Oedipus. But he is not just a rebellious son; he is also an intellectual explorer fascinated with the unknown and the occult, like Freud and like H.D. herself. And the knowledge of Prometheus' story is an adult possession, which allows retrospective self-understanding and recognition of the individual's universal significance. That knowledge has the capacity to turn the child into an adult-like Prometheus, to free him from his subordinate state—except that, as a child, H.D.'s brother has no access to it: he "doesn't know any Greek." Only the adult H.D. can make the connection that liberates and ennobles her brother. Her intuition is a gesture of tribute to a figure of complex importance in her life: the envied, preferred child who stood between her and her mother, an object of her love and admiration, and the lost victim of war.

For H.D., mythic patterns underlay all significant events and constituted their meaning, even if those patterns were not apprehended at the time. Thinking of another episode involving her brother, she evokes various sibling groupings from myth and legend: characters in Greek tragedies, Little-brother and Little-sister from Grimm's fairy tales, Castor and Pollux, or all four children of Leda (and so also a female pair, Helen and Clytemnestra): "They make a group, a constellation, they make a groove or a pattern, into which or upon which other patterns fit, or are placed unfitted and are cut by circumstance to fit" (29).

H.D.'s sense of constantly present mythical patterns and her habitual mythologizing of her own experience converge in the way she converts her encounter with Freud into itself a myth. *Tribute to Freud* is dedicated to Freud as "blameless physician" in a reference to Aesclepius, the legendary Greek doctor. H.D.'s analysis is assimilated to her own consequential visit to Greece and the union with her mother that, as he revealed to her, it signified. Writing of her sense that becoming Freud's student and analysand was a culminating achievement, she claims, "I had come home, in fact." She glosses this homecoming by quoting Poe's lines in which the speaker is brought home "to the glory that was Greece / and the grandeur that was Rome," adding, "This is, of course, Edgar Allen Poe's much-quoted *Helen*, and my mother's name was Helen" (44). In a characteristic dissolution of gender differences, H.D. here makes Freud a version of her mother, as she elsewhere identifies him, more canonically, with her father.

In another passage, H.D. refigures her relationship to Freud through a multi-faceted, and again gender-doubling, reference to the Alcestis myth. The myth is particularly congenial to H.D., as the subject of a play of Euripides, and to Freud, because of his own interest in the Greeks and especially in tragedy. But those cultural specifics are insignificant compared to the way the story captures key elements of their situation: Freud's imminent mortality at seventy-seven and H.D.'s wish that she could give up her life for him, as well as Freud's own role in saving his patients from spiritual death.

> Someone did it or offered to do it in a play once. . . . Who wrote the *Alcestis*? But it doesn't really matter who wrote it, for the play is going on now – at any rate, we are acting it, the old Professor and I. The old Professor doubles the part. He is Hercules struggling with Death and he is the beloved, about to die. Moreover he himself has, in his own character, made the dead live, has summoned a host of dead and dying children from the living tomb. (74)

Freud as a figure of mythology, coupled with the Freudian project of self-knowledge, resurfaces in *Helen in Egypt*, the book-length poem from the end of H.D.'s career that represents her final and most extensive contribution to mythological revision (compared by H.D. herself to Pound's "Cantos"). In *Helen in Egypt*, H.D. fully exploits the coincidence, in the figure of Helen, of a mythological character of

momentous importance both for her personally, as an avatar of her mother, and for the Greek tradition, as the cause of the Trojan War.

Helen in Egypt elaborates on a revisionary tradition from antiquity, where the reexamination of Helen was already a recurrent project. H.D. draws on an alternative tradition, told by the lyric poet Stesichorus and the historian Herodotus, and made the subject of a play by Euripides, according to which Helen never went to Troy but spent the time of the Trojan war in Egypt. Stesichorus' version, known primarily from an allusion in Plato's *Phaedrus* (243a), was inspired by recognition of Helen as a powerful divinity, who punished the poet with blindness until he retracted the common, shameful version of her story. Euripides, in his more playful dramatization, *Helen*, is also concerned with the rehabilitation of Helen's reputation, a major preoccupation of the character as he portrays her. He especially stresses the implications of a further element of the plot: Helen's place at Troy was taken by a phantom and the war was thus fought for an illusion.

In her own revision of the Trojan legend, H.D. expands on both Stesichorus' affirmation of Helen's power and Euripides' critique of warfare. Her poem is a reinvention of epic, with a female figure and female consciousness at its center. Homer's account is rewritten in a new form that draws both on Stesichorus' lyric mode and on Euripides' presentation of Helen's subjectivity. In place of epic's extended poetic narrative, H.D. offers an innovative alternation of prose and lyric. The prose passages make comments and pose questions, seemingly in the voice of the poet; the lyric passages outline a sequence of answers, most often in the voice of Helen herself.

The organizing principle of *Helen in Egypt* is Helen's quest for self-understanding, undertaken in reference to the powerful force of her traditional reputation. In her use of the Egyptian setting, H.D. builds on Greek notions of Egypt as an exotic, foreign place associated with antiquity and wisdom (Vasunia). For H.D., Egypt has additional significance as a setting in which the ancient and the occult come together; as the source of the Isis-Osiris myth, which fascinated her for its fusion of male and female, brother and sister; and as the site of a momentous personal experience: a vision, comparable to the one in Corfu, that she saw at the temple of Karnak.

Helen's quest for her own significance begins with an attempt to decipher the hieroglyphics in the temple of Amen and continues

through a series of encounters with key figures of her legend: Achilles, Achilles' mother Thetis, Paris, and Theseus. The heroes of legend here assume their significance in their relations with Helen, which are worked through in a series of settings encompassing Egypt, the white isle of Leuké, Athens, and again Egypt. The poem is in part a final work of autobiography, in which Helen represents H.D. herself, fused with her mother as alter-ego, coming to terms with her entire life. The figures Helen encounters can be correlated with the principal players in H.D.'s own story: Thetis with her mother; Theseus with Freud, and Achilles and Paris with many men who were her mentors, protectors, lovers, and objects of desire. At the same time, through myth's capacity to convert the personal into the universal, *Helen in Egypt* also offers, in broader terms, a new vision of female identity and female fulfillment.

Helen in Egypt works toward a conclusion in which the dilemmas of Helen's identity are finally resolved in a union with Achilles. In placing the marriage of Helen and Achilles at the center of her new myth, H.D. characteristically seizes on an obscure, partially occluded element in ancient tradition. The idea that the most beautiful woman and the most magnificent warrior should be united seems inevitable, and it surfaces at various points in our ancient sources. Scattered references from the Hellenistic period and later point to a widespread notion that, once their part in the Trojan legend was played out, Helen and Achilles lived together on the white island of Leuké, a place of immortality, and that they even had a son together, Euphorion (Lycophron, *Alexandra* 146.171–9; Pausanias 3.19.11; Philostratus, *Heroica* 10.32–40; Photius, *Bibliotheca* 190).

In the more dominant Homeric tradition, however, an erotic connection between Helen and Achilles is avoided. The possibility was evidently evoked in the early traditions from which Homer drew. The cyclic epic, the *Cypria*, contained an episode in which Achilles, arriving in Troy, asked to see Helen, and Thetis and Aphrodite arranged a meeting. But Hesiod went out of his way to note that Achilles was not one of Helen's suitors (*Catalogue of Women* fr. 68) and the *Iliad* itself conceives of its story in a way that places such a union out of the question, in keeping with another early tradition that both Achilles and Helen were created by Zeus in order to impose constant destructive warfare on humanity (Eustathius, *On the Iliad* 1.33.15). In the *Iliad*, the possibility of immortality is ruled out, and Helen and Achilles are assigned roles in a story of perpetual combat fueled by

the perpetual dissatisfaction of individual characters. Helen's role as object of competition is made possible by her association with weak husbands, Menelaus and then Paris, which leads to the fickleness for which she is reviled; Achilles' supremacy as a warrior stems from a constant sense of being deprived, whether of honor, of immortality, or of his companion Patroclus.

In H.D.'s retelling, Helen and Achilles can come together because they transcend their traditional roles as guilty sexual object and war-crazed hero. The sequence begins with Achilles' arrival in Egypt, where he attacks Helen, nearly choking her to death; she saves herself through an appeal to his mother Thetis. This reconciliation allows an intricate process of redefinition, in which the importance of the mother remains the indispensable constant. Achilles unlearns the hostile suppression of his mother that underlies his role as warrior. Helen encounters herself and her destiny in multiple forms: piecing together her memories, partly with the help of Theseus, reencountering conventional heterosexual love in the person of Paris, interpreting images that lead her to Isis, Thetis' Egyptian double, and to the water-lily (recalling the image of the earlier Leda poem) as a symbol of the Great Mother. The guilty, apologetic figure of H.D.'s earlier poem about Helen is reborn as a woman who understands and accepts her fate. She learns to differentiate herself from her treacherous sister Clytemnestra, to understand the eternal dynamic of love and war, and to recognize the fundamental fusion of erotic and maternal love, which she herself embodies. Paris is reconceived as Helen's child, and Helen and Achilles come together as at once mother and father, husband and wife, and brother and sister.[11]

H.D.'s fullscale appropriation and reimagining of classical myth in *Helen in Egypt* belongs to one end of a spectrum of relationships to ancient texts which also included, at the other, works of straightforward translation. H.D.'s brilliance as a translator can easily be overshadowed by her other achievements, but her work in this area has an exceptional clarity and authority, as in this crisp rendition of the opening of the *Odyssey* (*CP* 93).[12]

> *Muse,*
> *tell me of this man of wit,*
> *who roamed long years*
> *after he had sacked*
> *Troy's sacred streets.*

H.D.'s gift for translation is worth stressing in the context of her relation to myth because translation provides an apt model for her understanding and use of myth. Translation rests on the belief that different words can convey something essentially similar, that there exist in various languages different names for the same thing. H.D. was herself preoccupied with naming, ringing the changes on her own name and on the initials that were one version of it, and organizing a comprehensive vision around the given name of her mother. Central to her use of mythology was the simple act of applying classical names: "Oread" to the speaker of her early poem, "Calypso's island" to a cherished place, "Prometheus" to her brother, "Hellas" to her mother.

These acts of naming exploit the quality that makes myths different from other stories: their capacity to serve as a kind of shorthand, in which a brief allusion summons up a set of recognizable associations. At times, myth seems to be for H.D. a kind of master language, into which all experience can be translated—as when she is able to sum up everything that matters to her by placing Helen in Egypt. At the same time, myths are like the terms of any other language in their fluidity and malleability, their openness to redefinition and their need for interpretation and repeated retelling. Several of the female artists in H.D.'s fictions are translators, and H.D. herself used the metaphor of translation to express the attribution of meaning to images, a process implicated in her early "imagist" poetry, in Freud's interpretation of her Corfu vision ("The Professor translated the pictures on the wall . . . as a desire for union with my mother"), and in Helen's epiphanies as a reader of hieroglyphics. Classical myth was for H.D. a flexible medium of translation that allowed her to express over and over again the underlying connections between personal history and universal experience and between the seen world and the unseen realities it signifies.

8 A minority view exists, holding that Transcendentalism was basically an American phenomenon, with its roots in seventeenth-century American thought. Helen Deese tells how Caroline Healey Dall opposed the standard history of Transcendentalism as a European-based movement, and maintained that it originated in the thought and work of a woman, Anne Hutchinson.
9 In citing *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* here and in the following pages, I have used the text in Kelley, who includes the entire work, 229–362.
10 I thank Thomas Knoles, of the American Antiquarian Society, for informing me about the society's acquisition of these journals.
11 See Richard for chapters on this topic, "Models," 53–84, and "Antimodels," 85–122.

CHAPTER 3

1 As a result, virtually all critical work on H.D. touches in some way on her relationship to classical material. Among the most important discussions, to which this essay is thoroughly indebted, are Collecott, DuPlessis, *Career*, 1–30, Gregory, and Swann. For a full list of H.D.'s works, of which only a small selection is treated here, see DuPlessis and Friedman, 455–58.
2 The story of H.D's life is also told in biographies by Guest, and Robinson.
3 For direct influence of Hawthorne's versions of myths on H.D.'s, see Swann, 160–61, Gregory, 238.
4 On H.D.'s introduction to Greek and Latin in high school, see Wallace; for the impact on H.D. of a student performance of *Iphigenia in Aulis* by the senior class at the University of Pennsylvania, in which Pound took part, see Guest, 20–21.
5 For the place of this vision within broader debates about classicism and its relationship to romanticism, see Gregory, 11–22. As Gregory points out, H.D. herself did not belong comfortably to one side or the other of this debate and had equally strong or stronger affinities to romanticism. For the way H.D.'s engagement with Hellenism was also inflected by ardent homoeroticism, see Collecott, 103–34.
6 In an influential study of revisionist mythmaking by twentieth-century women poets, Alicia Ostriker identifies 1960 as a rough starting point and discusses H.D.'s late poem *Helen in Egypt,* written in 1952–1954 and published in 1961, as an early example. Ostriker, "Thieves of Language," 70, 79–82.

7 Some of the most important work from that period is collected in Friedman and DuPlessis.
8 On this poem, see further DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond*, 70–71, 109–10.
9 On this poem, see further Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 236–43.
10 On Harrison's probable influence on H.D., see Gregory, 108–25; on other proponents of matriarchy whom H.D. read, see Friedman, *Psyche Reborn*, 266.
11 For more detailed discussion of *Helen in Egypt*, see (among many others) Chisholm, 171–78; DuPlessis, *Career*, 108–15; Friedman, "Creating a Woman's Mythology"; Gelpi; and Gregory, 218–31.
12 For an appreciative account of H.D. as a translator of Greek poetry, see Carne-Ross, 7–8.

CHAPTER 4

1 For a comprehensive study of Cather's use of classical myth throughout her canon see Mary Ruth Ryder. Examples of articles with similar emphasis include among others: L. V. Jacks, "The Classics and Willa Cather," *Prairie Schooner* 35 (1961): 289–96; J. Russell Reaver, "Mythic Motivation in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*" *Western Folklore* 27 (1968): 19–25; Evelyn Thomas Helmick, "Myth in the Works of Willa Cather," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 9 (1968): 63–69; Donald Sutherland, "Willa Cather: The Classic Voice," in *The Art of Willa Cather*, eds. Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974): 156–82; Susan Rosowski, "Willa Cather—A Pioneer in Art: *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*," *Prairie Schooner* 55 (1981): 1441–54, and David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975). Other pieces focus on a single or limited number of texts. See, e.g., Ann Mosley, "Mythic Reality: Structure and Theme in Cather's *O Pioneers!*" in *Under the Sun: Myth and Realism in Western American Literature*, ed. Barbara Howard Meldrum (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1985): 92–105; John J. Murphy, "Euripides' Hippolytus and Cather's *A Lost Lady*," *American Literature* 53 (1981): 72–86; John N. Swift, "Memory, Myth, and The Professor's House," *Western American Literature* 29 (1986): 301–14; Mary R. Ryder, "'Our Antonia: The Classical Roots of Willa Cather's American Myth," *Classical and Modern Literature* 12 (1992): 111–17, and Jeane Harris, "Aspects of Athene in Willa Cather's Short Fiction," *Studies in Short Fiction* 28.2 (1991): 177–82.

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